Habermas's Expressivist Theology: Chalice Half-Full?

La teología expresivista de Habermas: ¿el cáliz medio lleno?

FELMON JOHN DAVIS
Union College Schenectady, NY
davisf@union.edu

Abstract: The article addresses the question of the respect owed to believers and their faiths and states that a demand for respect for the person of the believer does not imply a demand for respect for their faith. However, being 'respect' a complex and ambiguous notion, the article studies some arguments that go in the direction of justifying the move from respect for persons to respect for their beliefs. According to Habermas, there is a respect citizens of a democracy owe each other that requires taking each other's opinions seriously, including their religiously motivated opinions. What is more, Habermas claims that we all have something to learn from each other. The articles argues against this line of thought and states there is no obligation to respect anything about people's moral claims except their right to make them. The article argues against Habermas's approach by showing its epistemological and ontological inconsistency and concludes that respect for persons as moral reason-givers or as fellow-citizens does not lead to any substantial respect for the contents of their claims.

Keywords: respect, secular citizens vs. religious citizens, Habermas, religion.

Resumen: El artículo aborda la cuestión del respeto que se debe a los creyentes y sus creencias y afirma que la demanda de respeto por la persona del creyente no implica una demanda de respeto por su fe. Sin embargo, al ser el "respeto" una noción compleja y ambigua, el artículo analiza algunos de los argumentos que van en la dirección de justificar el desplazamiento del respeto a las personas al respeto por sus creencias. Según Habermas, hay un respeto que los ciudadanos de una democracia se deben entre sí que requiere tomar las opiniones del otro en serio, incluyendo sus opiniones religiosas. Y aún más, Habermas afirma que todos tenemos algo que aprender unos de otros. El artículo se opone a esta línea de pensamiento y afirma que no hay obligación de respetar nada acerca de las afirmaciones morales de las personas, salvo su derecho a hacerlas. El artículo argumenta en contra de enfoque de Habermas, mostrando su inconsistencia epistemológica y ontológica, y concluye que el respeto a las personas como sujetos capaces de dar razones morales o

como conciudadanos no lleva aparejado ningún respeto sustancial por los contenidos de sus declaraciones.

Palabras clave: respeto, ciudadanos seculares frente a ciudadanos religiosos, Habermas, religión.

1- *Respect Creep* or Habermas on What Atheists Owe the Religious

The still simmering "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy in the US shows the tangled threads of thinking about the very idea of *respect* where it is sometimes hard to distinguish whether opposing or supporting building a 'mosque' is a matter of respecting or disrespecting Moslem persons, respecting or disrespecting their religion or respecting or disrespecting their citizen rights[1].

Some demonize Islam. This certainly shows disrespect for a system of religious beliefs or perhaps rather for some systems of religious belief as there are different denominations of Islam as there are in Christianity and other religious systems. These anti-Islamic attitudes may be unfair, they are certainly usually ill-informed and prejudiced. On these grounds it would be wrong to hold this or any religious belief-system in disrepute. But is it wrong to hold a religious belief-system in disrepute because doing so shows disrespect for the people who believe in it? Answering yes is a form of *respect creep*: respect me, respect my religion.

As applied to religion, Blackburn describes *respect creep* as the movement from a demand for respect for the person of the believer to a demand for respect for the faith of the believer (Blackburn 2007). I think Blackburn is right, *respect creep* is an error. The temptation to *respect creep* is almost irresistible to thinkers who take respect for persons as a prime principle of relationship with other people. The slide whereby the expectation of "minimal toleration turns into a demand for more substantial

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1 The confusing controversy broke out in May 2010 when plans to build an Islamic community center, called the 'Cordoba House' or 'Park51', near so-called 'Ground Zero', site of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, became generally known. The Islamic Center was quickly dubbed the 'Ground Zero Mosque' even though it is not a mosque – it is an interfaith community center – and it is not at 'Ground Zero'. At the time a majority of Americans felt it was offensive to build a center inspired by Islam so near a place where thousands were murdered by "Islamic terrorists" regardless of the fact many of the victims were themselves Muslims. Some anti-Islamic feeling is also part of the mix.

respect," as Blackburn puts it, is slick but slanted. We have the anxious thought that [A] disrespect for a person's religious belief entails disrespect for the person; after all, unlike many other manners of belief, religious belief seems to reflects on the person and character of the believer – we can take believers' word for this as they assert their sincere faith is central to who they are. Then we have the praiseworthy thought that we owe persons a baseline respect. So we shouldn't disrespect people's faith; [B] respect for the person entails respect for their religious belief.

I do think [A] is true and so I agree people have reason to feel personally aggrieved if you dismiss their beliefs as foolishness or regressive (even if ever so politely). But trying to resist disrespect for the person whose beliefs you deplore entails an unreasonable psychological burden. Of course, there are exculpatory circumstances, for instance, culturally ingrained ignorance or prejudice, but that's the point, exculpation is appropriate. Suppose you are a secularist who cannot help but be wary of fundamentalist willingness to codify religious sentiment into law; you must see this not only as an intellectual mistake but also a moral flaw, perhaps a failing of character. Or the skeptic may find the dogma of the devout foolish and find the devout culpable for it; and so on. The religionist may find the secularist's 'relativism' morally lukewarm about values the law should revere and fervently protect; the devout may chide or pity the skeptic's modernist lack of moorings. It hardly seems reasonable to forbid people their sentiments of mutual abhorrence; it's not psychologically possible except at the price of nearly inhuman self-overcoming or human, all-too human bad faith.

Moreover, unpleasant as it is, it is not wrong to cause this injury, aggrievement at your disdain for them for their beliefs; no one is owed this kind of respect, no one is shielded from this disdain. (Of course, expressing it is another matter[2].) The problem is that 'respect' is a complex and

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2 "The mere fact that any prudent man finds it necessary to conceal a good part of his thoughts makes it clear enough that every member of our race is well advised to be on his guard and not to reveal himself completely." Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, p. 192.

ambiguous notion, one must attend carefully to its registers. We can see this by looking at some arguments that go in the direction of justifying the move from respect for persons to respect for their beliefs which I want to address here.

I want to look at the following theses which structure the paper.

(1) There is what I call the Habermas/Darwall line that respecting persons entails respecting the moral claims they make, perhaps this would bring us a step closer to having to respect the moral content of their religious beliefs too. The trouble is, it's wrong; there is no obligation to respect anything about people's moral claims except their right to make them.

(2) Habermas has fielded an interesting argument that there is a respect citizens of a democracy owe each other that requires taking each other's opinions seriously, including their religiously motivated opinions. I think this goes too far as a requirement even if it an attractive moral ideal of deliberative democracy.

(3) Habermas has extended this line to the suggestion that secular citizens must take religious opinions seriously even to the point of being prepared to learn from them. The trouble with this idea is the sense in which it is right is trivial, and the sense in which it is not trivial conflicts, I think, with Habermas's own meta-ethical views.

I will look at (1) and (2) in the immediately following sections of the paper and (3) gets addressed in the two sections on sources of ambivalence. The upshot is, "You can't get there from here." I don't see how respect for persons as moral reason-givers or as fellow-citizens leads to any substantial respect for their actual opinions or even for them as individuals. And though there may be a route that leads to the hypothesis that the non-religious have something to learn from the religious, I think Habermas's own theoretical premises bar him from it.

2- Respect for Persons, Respect for Citizens

Is there a relation between respecting a person and respecting their

beliefs? We can deploy Darwall's famous distinction between *recognition respect* and *appraisal respect* (Darwall 2004). The former applies to a person insofar as they occupy a role or bear a characteristic because of which you defer to them. I defer to parents who shout at their children because however much I may disapprove, they have 'standing' as the parents of the children which I lack. I defer to the authority of the judge at law even if I despise him as a drunken fool but it is his court. I defer to my fellow-citizens who have a right to voice their opinions even if I consider them benighted because of those opinions. I have *recognition respect* for their standing as parents, as officers of the court, as fellow-citizens, but do not regard the persons themselves very highly, I have low *appraisal respect* for them[3].

Can we find in this kind of respect a moral basis respecting individuals as persons? In more recent work Darwall argues we owe persons a kind of respect simply for being 'persons' for as 'persons' they have *dignity* parsed as the standing to make potentially warranted moral claims (Darwall 2004). This is analogous to treating the judge according to the 'dignity' of his 'standing' or position even if we contemn him for his personal behavior: each person has a certain standing even if we reject aspects of their behavior. Darwall's approach is very similar to the *Communicative Ethics* or *Discourse Ethics* which Habermas has developed since the 70's; Habermas argues that each individual has standing to raise *moral validity-claims* and finds the basis for this standing in the presuppositions of *discourse*: speech with one another about what is right and wrong logically (by illocutionary implicature) presupposes we are warranted to address claims to one another[4].

Let us assume that Habermas and/or Darwall's views about the

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3 Some distinguish *respect* from *esteem*, finding value in other people and in their conceptions. On the distinction between the *respect* and the *esteem* conceptions of toleration, see Forst 2002, Chapter 2. See also Forst's article entitled *Toleration* in the online *Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/toleration/#FouConTol>, original version of February 23, 2007.

4 Recent statements of the view can be found in Habermas (1995 & 1999).

standing to raise moral claims are right. What have we gained? Respect for people in the sense of respecting their standing to raise moral claims is perfectly consistent with contempt for them and for their views, indeed, in one sense, it is a precondition of it. Moral contempt only makes sense as aimed at persons so, accepting the Darwall/Habermas line, moral contempt only makes sense as aimed at beings who have 'standing'. It is what they say (and do) in that standing that merits our disfavor.

Consider that the fact that I am obligated to take seriously a claim does not imply that I am obligated to accept it. I may find the claim unjustified in many serious ways. Habermas's *discourse ethics* lays down the obligation to justify one's claims but it is relatively silent about what happens when this justification fails. To use Darwall's example, as I press my heavy foot on your tender toe, I may seriously consider your claim that I should (morally speaking) cease and desist -- and reject it. I have satisfied this elementary duty of respect. We obviously need to know a lot more: we need to know what counts as good or bad justification. (In addition, to have practical effect, we have to agree about the duty.) The structure of basic respect sheds no light on the acceptability of the content of the claims.

So the Darwall/Habermas approach yields a very thin concept of respect[5]. It only seems to have more motive force because one imagines some moral background conditions. For instance and especially one imagines that one is addressing people one considers worthy on other grounds than the mere fact they have the moral standing to express moral opinions. One imagines they are not simply benighted, one imagines there is plausibility in what they say, etc. etc.

So there is a breach between respecting people *persons*, respecting them as good *persons*, and respecting their views and beliefs. Perhaps we can go further if we fill in some background conditions. The 'Mosque'

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5 Still this is not nothing: it establishes that persons have the status to express their opinions and, other things being equal, to live according to them. (Some students of Habermas want to add positive duties to support others' will to live according to their opinions, the so-called *Prinzip der Betroffenheit*.) "Other things being equal." Therein lies the rub. In the cases that matter, they are not equal.

controversy opened some common ground between the proponents and the opponents as most agreed that the sponsors had a right to build the Islamic center. The opponents argued that it would offend legitimate sensitivities if they did build it, the proponents either granted the sensitivities were legitimate but outweighed by other considerations or held them for expressions of prejudice or misinformation. But the common ground is precisely the 'ground zero' of *recognition respect,* applied to the role of citizens marking the minimal deference citizens owe their fellow-citizens in the exercise of their citizen rights even as they disapprove of the vices of their judgment, even of their character. So we must respect fellow-citizens' opinions in the sense that we respect their right to them. Perhaps citizenship in a shared democratic order is a moral background condition that would serve to support an obligation to respect persons qua democratic citizens and links it to respect for their moral and religious opinions. We'll come to that in the following section. For now the point is that respect based on your status as reason-giver does not reach to respect for persons as good reason-givers, or even good people. We need another argument for that. Perhaps appeal to their status as fellow-citizens in a democracy will do.

3- Democracy and Learning from Religion

Habermas urges that life in democratic community obligates us to take seriously the claims our fellow-citizens make on us for the validity of their religious beliefs, indeed he argues the secularist must at least start with the assumption there is something to learn from religious belief. (It is unclear what happens if this assumption is defeated.)[6] This is indeed an instance of *respect creep* but perhaps it is justified? For Habermas democracy is about considering what we can do to accommodate each other's needs and interests which we can know and prioritize only through

6 See for instance, Habermas 2005. His initial motivation is a concern with fairness of burden: since the language of the public square is secular (in secular democracies), the religious are at a disadvantage. But alleviating this burden requires the thought that the religious actually have something to contribute.

deliberation. (Analytically) democracy is about what each of us wants, individually and collectively, so (ideally) each voice counts.

It is true that this democratic principle of respect implies that we must take seriously what our fellow-citizens say and further, that we all have something to learn from each other. But what it implies we in the first instance have to learn is what everyone wants. Deliberation yields information about the distribution of desires. And this involves an element of translation: mutual interpretation of what people are saying and what they mean. There is a bias for the secular here if, as is the case in liberal democracies, the language of the public sphere is secular, thus the religious cannot find their tongue. As several have pointed out, and Habermas concurs, there is inequality of hermeneutic burdens: religious folk must learn to speak secular even if it goes deeply against the grain, while the secular can comfortably speak as they are wont. Habermas covers this angle by obligating secular citizens to play Aaron to the religious citizens' Moses: the former are to 'translate' the claims of the latter in the secular public forum. But he cannot mean that all that secularists have to learn from religionists is what the religionists want! That is both uninteresting and perfectly consistent with dismissing religious belief as babble or worse. Blackburn assumes that even though he is an atheist, he can know what the religionist wants to say. He denies he must lend it any credence.

We can go a step further: deliberation yields information about which wants we are all willing to permit to be satisfied; in this case secularists and religionists can come to agreement about what everyone will permit everyone to do. This would be a fortunate outcome of the translation project as it would come close to producing what Habermas terms *legitimation,* the condition where everyone agrees about what everyone is permitted and/or obligated to do. This is more interesting than simply knowing what others want but it is also quite compatible with dismissal of religious belief. That we grant each other permissions to say and do things does not imply we endorse what is said and done. I don't endorse the parents' harsh and public scolding of their child in the supermarket but I don't want to outlaw it

either.

Democratic principle does not require approval of the content of each others' beliefs, it does not require agreement in beliefs. Secularists may as happily reject belief in the resurrection of Jesus as Christians affirm it, both in complete compliance with democratic principle. Of course, Habermas knows this. The key to Habermas's defense of, and qualified advocacy for, religious belief lies in his drawing a distinction which Blackburn also draws but to contrary purpose: they distinguish the content of religious assertion from the attitudes the assertions evince. Habermas puts the gravamen of religious expression not in the assertion of fact about the world but expression of attitudes towards the world and our place in it.

Onto-theology is the view that religious language purports to be about actual facts and actual entities such as that there is actually is non-material person, a 'Supreme Being', who creates the world and providentially guides our history, rewarding the just and punishing the unjust[7]. The intellectual expression of this ontologically based faith is *natural theology* with its long tradition extending from the Church Fathers over Anselm and Aquinas to Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, William Lane Craig and others, who field sophisticated arguments designed to prove, or at least establish the reasonableness of belief in, the existence of this being.

Against this, *expressivist theology*[8] claims religious language is not

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7   Blackburn introduces the term on page 183 of his *Religion and Respect* essay and while he says it is "the done thing to distinguish between theology and 'ontotheology'," he doesn't cite any specific sources. He may have Heidegger and Derrida in mind. It is not a foregone conclusion in some quarters that there really is such a thing as religious belief. I don't think Wittgenstein thought the religious believe in 'religious facts'; Georges Rey argues that is the religious no more have 'beliefs' about God than we have 'beliefs' about Hamlet or Jane Eyre. (Georges 2001) I assume here religious people do literally believe what they say they literally believe. Thanks to Mark Wunderlich for awakening to some problems of belief-attribution.

8   The term doesn't refer to ordinary believers' view of their faith, they tend to be *ontotheologians*, maintains Blackburn, and I concur; imagine convincing an ordinary Christian that Jesus's bones were excavated in a crypt in Palestine: I doubt they would brush this refutation of the Resurrection with the reflection that the Resurrection was anyway just metaphor and allegory for eschatological

really assertive or if it is, then that is a superficial characteristic, one that is not what is essential to it or significant about it. What is central and significant is that religious language gives expression to attitudes towards the world and life, its descriptive or representational content is superficial or of secondary import. Belief 'that' there is a God may not express a proposition so much as the bearing one has for whom, in William James's words, "tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things."

In short, there is no theological assertion, only theological allegory. Blackburn concedes that religious allegory may give expression precisely to attitudes that even atheists like himself revere, "The pieties of the people are human pieties, representing desire, hope, disappointment, remembrance, attempts to give public meaning to the great events of birth, marriage, and death." (Blackburn 2007, 186). Since it is attitudes such as these that are the real subject of religion and not the (allegedly) untenable theological content, we certainly can respect individuals' religion, their religious attitudes that is, while rejecting the literal truth-claims. And thus we can preserve the idea that respect for persons may support respect for their religion, a kind of 'second-order piety', as Blackburn calls it, a reverence for the attitudes underneath the literal religious claims. A caring and careful response to what is perceived to have intrinsic value is a form of respect Kant called *reverentia*, an attitude we have to what we perceive to be *sacred*; Blackburn writes, "To regard something as sacred is to see it as marking a boundary to what may be done" (Blackburn 2007, 191). Even atheists can admit the 'sacred'. Of course what they can't do is believe 'sacred' values can have 'eternal' validity, "Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past," wrote Isaiah Berlin (1969, 171-172)[9].

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optimism.

9 Of course some contemporary *moral realists* take the 'eternality' or 'timelessness' of moral values (rather the propositions stating them) for a

Blackburn offers a striking illustration which puts us in position to make sense of the idea that we can learn from an attitude: Suppose a corporation could permanently fix a satellite in the night sky advertising Coca-Cola. We would find this abhorrent, most of us; we abhor, says Blackburn, the insensitivity of it: "Having the wrong attitudes is as bad or worse than having the wrong beliefs" (Blackburn 2007, 192). It is not that this affront is "a crime against the night sky," says Blackburn as "The cosmos is big enough to take the odd McDonald's advertisement, but we are not." What is amiss is the attitude that would commercialize everything and deny people the solace or wonder of the unfathomable. Let's add to Blackburn's scenario. Imagine now the ambitious marketing fanatic, at first closed off to these considerations and feelings, but who is persuaded at long last of their weight, it would be as a revelation to them after which they could appropriately speak of having "learned" something they were missing before.

This expanded scenario, I believe, bears comparison with and can illuminate Habermas's handling of religious language. Consider his opposition to genetic 'enhancement' of the fetus where we imagine the looming possibility that parents can 'design' the unborn to taste, for instance, manipulating intellectual ability, talents, physical features, etc. according to the parents' fancy or self-serving ideals and not for the therapeutic needs of the unborn. *Liberal eugenics* erases the heretofore fundamental distinction between what one may tamper with and what is 'Unverfügbar', in particular, it seriously undermines the moral autonomy (self-determination) of the child itself since some other individual has disposition over what it will become.

While he says that respect for autonomy has been basic to our 'species-ethical self-understanding' and the framework of our moral thinking presupposes it, there is no extra-moral argument for adopting the moral

serious metaphysical possibility, such as Russ Shafer-Landau, e.g. in his *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (88-90). Richard Swinburne and others consider some moral propositions *necessary truths* and thus eternal, this tradition goes back to Duns Scotus, Aquinas and before. Of course, Blackburn will have none of this.

framework itself. This framework is a *form of life*, binding as it were from within but not from the outside. With a shudder Habermas contemplates slippage into a new cultural form where autonomy plays a lesser role and where the line between 'natural' and 'artificial' is erased. He does not think the bearers of such a culture are making an 'error' in the sense of implying a falsehood or committing a fallacy. But he contemplates the prospect of this cultural form with horror and aversion.

Resistance to these trends requires more than refutation by recourse to argument. The argument that a practice is a threat to autonomy only carries weight if you care about autonomy in the first place, and Habermas sees no non-circular way to prove that you should care about it: there is no point in making a moral argument when it's morality itself which is in question. Morally speaking, you ought to care but that may not be sufficient motivation.

But we are still responsive to some attitudes and 'archaic emotions', for instance, revulsion at the idea of genetic 'chimeras' but he fears that our secular culture lacks a potent language for giving expression and shape to these emotions. Here he sees a special place for the 'semantic potential' of religious discourse. Religion possesses "differenzierte Ausdruckmöglichkeiten und Sensibilitäten für verfehltes Leben, für gesellschaftliche Pathologien, für das Misslingen individueller Lebensentwürfe und die Deformation entstellter Lebenszusammenhänge" (Habermas 2001, 31) and a "starken Begriff des Guten." Especially the imagery of the Creator/Created relationship, he maintains, preserves the freedom of the created person as not only does God's love require the freely loving reciprocation of the Created person, but also God's status as Creator highlights the necessary parity of one created person with another – this harkens back to Adolph von Hartnack's line about the "fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Man." Thus, the 'translation' of the religious (pseudo)assertion that we are created by God can impress on us the importance of protecting the integrity and autonomy of the child against its parents' whims.

Habermas's approach causes ambivalence on several fronts; I want

to address two of them which are closely related, they have to do with the epistemological and ontological constraints of his theorizing.

4- Ambivalence in Epistemology

One source of ambivalence arises from a dilemma engendered by the notion of 'translation'. Habermas's apologia for religious belief involves the notion of *translating* what he calls its *cognitive content* into appropriately secular language. For instance, the figure of the relationship between Creator and Creature gets *translated* into the language of equality of the person of the parents and their children. Now if this is a *translation* of a religious insight into a secular insight, then it is unclear what is specifically religious about it. The special 'categorical' status of the values expressed in the religious figure can be expressed in secular language. Blackburn, the atheist, also holds the night sky 'sacred'; secular-minded scientists consider the integrity of research 'sacred', the non-religious judge may hold the law 'sacred'. Blackburn's 'second-order' pieties for the human pieties mentioned above are not religious per se nor are the first-order pieties of which he speaks. They are human piety for human matters. Habermas must answer what is there to learn from a religious casting of values which cannot otherwise be accessed in secular terms.

This dilemma of translation of course is not to deny that secular citizens can learn from their religious fellow citizens. As mentioned before, and trivially, they can learn what their religious co-citizens want to say and what they are willing to permit as matters of public policy and morality. More interestingly, their religious compatriots may recall them to values that are neglected in the secular sphere. One thinks of the biblical intonation and prophetic gestus of Martin Luther King recalling Americans to the meaning of 'equality under the law' in ways more likely to stir a nation than volumes of Rawls. But this is not adding to secular values, it is motivating them in an effective manner. It marks the line Kierkegaard draws separating the Socratic *anamnesis* or recollection from the distinctive claims of faith and revelation.

As *anamnesis* religion is not different from other media such as film, stories, poetry, music, or from the real-life practice of morality or political and social engagement; they all might have similar – or often even greater – motivating effects on individuals and groups. In short, the point cannot be that secularists can learn from religious citizens what they already in some way know! Habermas's example of genetic manipulation is not especially encouraging: the atheist can hold self-determination as 'sacred' (that is, as inviolate) as the theist but wholly without any talk about 'creators' and 'creatures'. The actual arguments Habermas presents in his *liberale Eugenik* (Habermas 2005b) book are all plausible wholly without any religious reference, and couching them in religious terms wouldn't necessarily make them more compelling or more illuminating for non-believers.

And not different from Kierkegaard, Habermas is staunch in his insistence that secular reason cannot incorporate revelation. This marks an unsurpassable boundary for him[10]. For one thing, the epistemological premises of his *post-metaphysical thinking* rule it out as it rejects all appeals to self-evidence or special intuitions about the nature of extra-mental reality[11]. Knowledge of a 'transcendent' reality is ruled out *ab initio*. But then the project of translation seems doomed to failure as what is specifically religious is specifically what cannot be smuggled into the secular domain. Habermas's naturalistic epistemology sets a limit to

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10 I focus on the epistemological and ontological boundaries but Habermas is perfectly clear there are limits to 'religious speech' in the political domain; see his contentions with Wolterstorff and Weithmanin in *Religion in der Öffentlichkeit. Kognitive Voraussetzungen für den "Öffentlichen Vernunftsgebrauch" Religiöser und Säkularer Bürger*, in: *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, pp. 139-140. Religious speech is excluded from the legislature and from the courts. Although Taylor wishes to woo the secularist into acknowledging the validity of religious belief, Habermas and he agree on these limits.

11 Habermas often makes appeals to self-evidence when it comes to meta-cognitive or semantic intuitions about what we mean in making moral claims. He believes 'conceptual analysis' delivers *a priori* truths about logical relations, semantics and speech-pragmatics (*speech-act theory*).

receptivity to the religious.

Related to this is the fact that the secularist has to be carefully selective about what she translates, or rather accepts, from religious doctrine. Habermas finds intimations of autonomy in the monotheistic creator/creature relationship where others[12] have found the creature's radical submission to God's moral authority. He sees in it foreshadowings of equality among created persons while others see the basis for glorifying arbitrary restrictions such as the subordination of women (St. Paul) or the outcasting of divergent sexuality. This is to say the secularist has no choice but to consider religious claims by her own admittedly non-religious conscience or maybe we should say that qua secularist, she has already made her choice. The choice of a naturalistic epistemology has already decided against the specifically religious.

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12 Habermas makes no effort, as far as I know, to see to what extent actually existing religious believers see matters this way; certainly American monotheism accommodates room for class differences; in this vein Marc Brost and Bernd Ulrich write in a recent edition of *Die Zeit* (*Mehr Staat mit Weniger Geld!*, 4 August 2011, page 3), "Neoliberale haben ein erotisches Verhältnis zu sozialen Unterschieden. Die sind für Liberale eine Feier ihrer eigenen Leistung; wenn sie religiös sind, auch Vorschein göttlicher (Leistungs-)Gerechtigkeit." Perhaps equality before God has no straightforward translation into equality before the law. Many thinkers espy in monotheism tendencies to egalitarianism; Hauke Brunckhorst finds many precedents and reminds us of John Ball's famous sermon at the time of the peasant revolts, "When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty." Hauke Brunckhorst cites sources from Peter Bickle's, *Von der Leibeigenschaft zu den Menschenrechten*, and elsewhere and earlier to support his notion of "der (wenigstens im Prinzip der Gottesebenbildlichkeit) *egalitäre* Monotheismus." H. Brunckhorst, *Die grosse Geschichte der Exkarnation* (unpublished).

5- Ambivalence in Ontology

Blackburn's *expressivist* interpretation of theology parallels and contrasts with his *expressivist* interpretation of ethical discourse with the difference that while rejecting *expressivism* in theology, he endorses it in meta-ethics. On the surface ethical judgments look like fact-stating propositions ascribing, for instance, the property of 'wrongness' to acts of cruelty. But this is a misreading of their actual function; "Cruelty is wrong" does not state a fact, it expresses an attitude of disapproval. This does not mean that moral judgments are arbitrary as the idea stated by "x is wrong (merely) because we disapprove of it" itself expresses a moral attitude, an attitude, Blackburn says, we generally strongly disapprove of. You might call it a 'second-order impiety'. We deplore attitudes that equate moral attitudes to individual whimsy or idiosyncratic preference. We feel it is morally unacceptable, people shouldn't (morally speaking) think of morality that way because it doesn't take the business of morality seriously enough, not because there are moral facts underlying our judgments.

Similarly, Habermas treats ethical judgments as ways of expressing attitudes, in his case, attitudes urging others, with greater or lesser force, to act according to desire or principle. Ethical judgments are *wahrheits-analog* in the sense that their syntax is analogous to the syntax of truth-stating propositions. But this should not mistake their illocutionary force which defines their real function. Nor does Habermas's *prescriptionism* mean that moral judgments are arbitrary or 'relative' since they can attain impersonal validity if our attitudes converge or rather would converge given sufficient information, good will and emotional and cognitive acuity.

A common thread binding Habermas and Blackburn is the insistence that we determine right or wrong, by complex and mostly inarticulate schemes of coordination and reflection[13]. This brings us to the second point

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13 In commenting on the 'narrative of secularity' Charles Taylor writes, "What is striking about it is the claim to issue the norms we live by on our own authority. This thought can set off a tremor, a frisson in us, as we sense how much we are defying an age-old sense of higher, more-than-human authority; and the courage we need to take it up." (Taylor 581) Taylor believes it can also lead to

of ambivalence: The very idea of God is incompatible with *expressivist* meta-ethics. According to traditional theism God is the foundation of moral value, indeed God is in some sense the summum bonum. As William Lane Craig puts it:

On the theistic view, objective moral values are rooted in God. He is the locus and source of moral value. God's own holy and loving nature supplies the absolute standard against which all actions are measured. He is by nature loving, generous, just, faithful, kind, and so forth. Thus if God exists, objective moral values exist. (Craig 2009, 30)

This is both an ontological and a normative thesis that implies the real existence of God. The very fact of God's existence is supposed to prescribe to us what we should do - specifically imitate God to the extent humanly possible. God has 'moral magnetism', to use Bloomfield's phrase (2001, 154 & 157), to a preeminent degree. And what this means is that theism is committed to the existence of a 'queer' entity or property in Mackie's sense of "to-be-pursuedness[14]" or rather "to-be-emulatedness."

But Habermas and Blackburn's *expressivist* commitments rule out the idea that a fact as such can prescribe how we ought to act: (a) God would be a 'queer' entity, inexplicable in 'naturalistic' terms to be sure but more to the point, (b) God's very being would be normatively prescriptive, the mere fact of God's existence would entail how we ought to act or be (c) which would trouble our moral self-determination[15]; finally (d) given that God is

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dismay and uprootedness. (See Taylor on 'narratives of self-authorization' (especially 588-589.)

14 This seems to be what Sartre means when he calls God an "impossible object of desire". God would unite in one object both being and value; God would be a being desirable aside from any motion in the heart of its desirers.

15 The point about 'autonomy' often occurs in discussions of the *Divine Command Theory* according to which what is right is right because it is commanded by God, which puts human moral agents in servitude. For some this is as it should be (see Peter Geach, "The Moral Law and the Law of God" (online at <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/geach.htm>, originally in *God and the Soul*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969; he follows Hobbes and William of Ockham). The *Divine Command Theory*, however, is different from the more subtle view Craig espouses following Aquinas and Augustine according to whom God does not 'command' the Good, God is the Good, that

supernatural, our knowledge of God would seem to require special cognitive powers[16] which is hard to square with our other beliefs about perception, sensation and ideation.

Consequently for Blackburn the appeal to religion involves bad faith. You make statements which seem to be factual assertions precisely in order to give your attitudes more normative force, the statements "cement a particular way of associating 'ought' and 'is' and insulate it from criticism" (Blackburn 2007, 189) If you say that God created woman from Adam's rib, or homosexuality is an abomination, or God promised you a patch of land, you seem to stand on stronger ground than if you simply disparage women or express your abhorrence of gay people or make a landgrab. The 'realist' theological talk serves to "sprinkle fairy dust on the transition between 'is' and 'ought'" and "makes religious language the power that it is"[17]. (Blackburn 2007, 189).

Like Blackburn, Habermas should reject the idea of God as an impossibility, and not just an improbability or suspended option. Committed as he is to an *expressivist meta-ethics* he must reject the ontology of theism, the ontological 'queerness' of the entity which is God. Rejection of theistic ontology, or at least indifference to it, is in fact wholly in line with how Habermas consistently writes, for instance, about the topic of so-called *liberal eugenics*: he doesn't for a second consider whether the 'creator' actually exists and whether the frame 'creature/creator' names a relationship with a real entity. For him this talk is all allegory, metaphor.

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towards which the will would incline were it not for the hindrance of sin or ignorance.

16 Plantinga's talk of *a sensus divinitatis*, following on Calvin's moral theology, makes the point sound 'spooky', like a kind of God–> Human telepathy. Taylor's talk of 'epiphany' is, well, more revealing (Taylor 607).

17 Can't the same be said of Blackburn's *quasi-realism*? Isn't dressing moral attitudes up in fact-stating language also a way of sprinkling fairy dust on the transition between 'is' and 'ought'? I do not have an answer except to say that Blackburn perhaps thinks the move is legitimate (albeit often unjustified) in morality because morality unlike religion doesn't require appeal to non-natural entities and agents. Thanks to John Kekes for raising this question (in correspondence).

However, in his recent work he recommends a kind of *methodological atheism*: the secular thinker is best advised, according to this view, to keep an open mind about the question of the existence of God while proceeding as if (thus the 'methodological') God did not exist (thus the 'atheism'). Such *falllibilism* is part of any epistemology appropriate to the modern condition: all claims are subject to ongoing revision and open to potential refutation. Rational agreement *hic et nunc* is always just provisional. Thus in the religious context we must keep an ear open to the "semantic potential" of religious discourse which may have something to teach us. The secularist ought to keep an open door: who knows if the religionist might not turn out being right after all is said and done?

But it is wrong to use fallibilism as a wedge in the door for religious belief. Fallibilism does not forbid us to consider some views downright false – that isn't fallibilism, that's skepticism![18] Fallibilism requires no more than the disposition to self-correction or the readiness to change course. By his own reckoning what Habermas leaves the door open to is honoring (some) religious attitudes, not the contents of religious belief. His *methodological atheism* ends up being little more than a kind of compliment of politesse: their hearts are in the right place but what the religious actually say is false (or to be excluded).

The *expressivist* can keep an open mind about the existence of this entity only on pain of jettisoning *expressivism*. Thus the *expressivist* cannot maintain an attitude of openness towards the ontology of theism. Habermas's position is committed to straight-up atheism, in spite of himself, like Blackburn who proceeds more consistently in the matter.

Habermas's *methodical atheism* is itself a limited fallibilism, it does not put his expressivism or rather its associated ontology on the table. The expressivist would have to imagine himself in a position analogous to the marketing fanatic's, requiring an 'attitude adjustment' in order to see what

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18 I find Clayton's remarks on fallibilism and Habermas's choice of the term *methodological atheism* useful in his "The Contemporary Science and Religion Discussion" (in: *Scientific Explanation and Religious Belief: Science and Religion in Philosophical and Public Discourse*. Tübingen 2005.)

the religious are talking about, "[W]e have to be aware of how believers and unbelievers can experience their world very differently. The sense that fullness is to be found in something beyond us can break in on us as a fact of experience […]," says Taylor[19] (Taylor 14). The marketing fanatic has to break out of the one-dimensionality of his frame of 'instrumental reason'; the secularist would have to break out of the flatness (all horizontal, no vertical dimension) of the 'immanent frame' according to which the different structures we live in: scientific, social, technological, and so on, "are part of a 'natural', or 'this-worldly' order which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the 'supernatural' or 'transcendent'." (Taylor 594). That means the secularist would have to be open to the possibility that theism may be true, and open to the possibility of the real existence and power of the 'transcendent', in a word, open to God.

To be fair, there are passages where Habermas seems to consider this option. For instance in a pregnant passage he refers to the irruption of the 'extraordinary within the everyday' ('Ausseralltägliches im Alltag') which resists translation into the secular discourse of philosophy.[20] I am not sure how to interpret this passage but I think it supports my point that there is no

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19 Taylor defines 'religion' in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent where the 'transcendent' for Taylor as a believer is "the God of Abraham" (Taylor 769); *fullness* refers a sense of meaning beyond the ordinary and immanent (Taylor 5-12 *et passim*). The idea religious belief is a matter of experience has a long parentage; contemporary thinkers insisting on this include Plantinga who maintains *properly basic beliefs* can include belief in God, and Alston who argues God can be an element of experience and perception.

20 *Die ihrer Weltbildfunktion weitgehend beraubte Religion ist, von außen betrachtet, nach wie vor unersetzlich für den normalisierenden Umgang mit dem Außeralltäglichen im Alltag. Deshalb koexistiert auch das nachmetaphysische Denken noch mit einer religiösen Praxis. […] Die fortbestehende Koexistenz beleuchtet sogar eine merkwürdige Abhängigkeit einer Philosophie, die ihren Kontakt mit dem Außeralltäglichen eingebüßt hat. Solange die religiöse Sprache inspirierende, ja unaufgebbare semantische Gehalte mit sich führt, die sich der Ausdruckskraft einer philosophischen Sprache (vorerst?) entziehen und der Übersetzung in begründende Diskurse noch harren, wird Philosophie auch in ihrer nachmetaphysischen Gestalt Religion weder ersetzen noch verdrängen können.* J. Habermas, "Motive Nachmetaphysischen Denkens", in: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, p. 60.

'mediation', as Kierkegaard would say, between the secular and the religious though Habermas's qualifying 'not yet' (vorerst?) hints at some perspective from which the horizons of the secular and the religious might 'merge'. I have to play fallibilist here, granting the possibility but – I don't see it.

Of course 'openness' comes in modes and degrees. Just as respect modulo acknowledging a person's status as reason-giver is perfectly compatible with disdaining the person and dismissing their reasons, openness modulo acknowledging a possibility is compatible with disparaging belief in it as unreasonable, unfounded, false. This is why fallibilism stretches an empty hand to the religious believer unless it is combined with a serious offer to see the believer's position as compelling on the believer's terms, so it's not 'translation' alone that is called for but willingness to contemplate abandoning the secularist standpoint.

The problem is that the thoughtful secularist needs better reasons to reach this far into the other-worldly than comity with fellow citizens, respect for their status as reason-givers or awareness of one's own fallibility. Possibly *natural theology* could deliver such reasons by proposing arguments and evidence of God's existence, and of course there is conviction gained through "a self-transformation beyond the everyday" (Taylor 592), *metanoia*, conversion, but otherwise, from the secularist standpoint, there is little reason to believe there is something to learn here from the faithful.

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